GERALD MARTIN

So of all of the licenses you have had the pleasure of working with, which has been the most enjoyable for you?

I've enjoyed all of them for different reasons, even the ones I initially disliked working on (Star Wars, which I grew to love more and more as time went on). Of the top contenders, it would probably be Planescape (because it allowed for almost any design idea you - or the player - could dream up, *Torment: Tides of Numenera* has the same sort of freedom about it) and Fallout (working on *Fallout 2* was one of the best times of my life, even if I didn't think so at the time because I was so stressed out between working on it and Planescape). Fallout had/has so many cool game mechanics about it and really pried open the branching quest solution design door that had been closed for so long. It also paid a lot of attention to actions in the world and your character build choices - and rewarded you for them.

What type of setting do you prefer to work in: Fantasy or Science Fiction? Do you pick a setting first and then tailor the project to that or vice versa?

It doesn't matter to me as long as the fantasy is interesting. Let me define that. The spell system and magic/spiritual physics can make it stand out or kill it. If it's regurgitated without a signpost to set it significantly apart (either visual or in fantasy physics), it's often not interesting and more of a challenge to design for.

But the execution is the thing. If someone had told me that they had designed a fantasy spell system based on the elements, I'd likely go all BlankFace™ and stare at them silently until they left. But show me storyboards for *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (series) and demonstrate all the ways that spell system expresses itself within the world, how it shapes cultures, architecture, and fighting styles, and I'd sit up and take notice.

If that wasn't enough, *Legend of Korra* does an even more amazing job of showing how the same world can evolve even further from the foundation and discoveries of the previous series, keeping the feel of the original show but using the former's touchstones and characters to propel the plotline and world development even further. At Obsidian, I cited the transition elements between these two shows as one of the best design examples for how to make a world's chronology relevant and reactive to the player's choices.

Sci-Fi is a special treat. I rarely get the chance to do sci-fi work beyond Fallout, but I would be eager to play around in sci-fi worlds, absolutely. *FTL: Advanced Edition* was a perfect exercise in this arena, it allowed me to design a whole series of sci-fi short story encounters including encounters to round out the war-torn universe - plague ships, refugee ships, brand new hull-devouring alien race encounters, and more, and I had a lot of fun doing it.

How do you decide what yourself and Obsidian are going to focus on project-wise? Has Kickstarter helped or hindered you in this?

The owners usually decide what I'll be doing next, and we also decide the course of our next projects (although our CEO often is the compass for this, and it also depends on what publishers are willing to finance). I do occasionally get some say on the project I'm on, but often, I find I'm divided across so

many projects that it's hard to focus on a single one - doing both Eternity and our new undisclosed project at Obsidian was pretty rough, combined with owner responsibilities.

Kickstarter has been a nice breather and it absolutely has given us more freedom in what we work on. In addition, it's also allowed more freedom in production, content, and milestones (it was one of the few projects where we had the freedom to be late for quality, something which is a huge fight for any of our other projects).

Do you prefer the design side, writing side, or producing side of a game? Is it dependent on what the game is for you to prefer one over another or is the decision made before the gameplay and narrative is decided?

I like all aspects, and they're all tied together more than people may realize. John Gonzalez, one of narrative co-conspirators and the creative lead for *Fallout: New Vegas* once paid me the compliment of calling me a "writer with production sensibilities." This comment was sparked after a long discussion of how to organize topics in a dialogue and sub-topic breakdowns for each to make a seemingly-complicated dialogue manageable for the player and the developer (we were working through Caesar and Mr. House at the time, trying to demonstrate the balance between organic and menu-driven trees and how to organize a blend of both so the designer doesn't go insane - if curious on the answer, my explanation was to start the dialogue an organic opener, make it reactive for a few options the player must thread their way through, then go into the menu-driven selections after, casting the organic portion away and recording the reactivity as needed - speaking to the NPC again would re-awaken solely the menu tree).

What was it like going back and revisiting a franchise that, though some people did not know it at the time, gave birth to another in the form of Wasteland inspiring Fallout?

Going back to both *Wasteland 2* (well, my first Wasteland experience, although I played so much *Wasteland 1*, I felt like I was part of it) and *Fallout: New Vegas* was an exciting time.

For Fallout we were able to revisit many of the campaign elements that had been developed back in Interplay with Caesar's Legion, the Nightkin-Stealth-Boy-sparked insanity, the Caravan Mafia Wars, and the desperate hand of NCR clutching to keep what's left of the world intact as wolves circled them. Oh, and Hoover Dam. Always Hoover Dam (true story: in the original draft of Van Buren, Hoover Dan was a community, more like a collection of piers and debris from everything that had washed down the Colorado and gathered against the wall of the Dam). I recently did a podcast for *Gamer's Tavern* (http://gamerstavern.org/ - hopefully soon to be aired) that runs through all the ideas we took from the pen-and-paper version of Van Buren, and how they made their way (and mutated) into New Vegas and the DLCs.

Wasteland 2 was a different beast, but no less compelling. The fact that the world of Wasteland had come to a nuclear halt in the 80s (well, technically the 90s, but the game came out in the 80s, so I tend to focus on that) gave it much different touchstones for the player's experience in the game, new visuals, new cultural hallmarks to both pay homage to the period, and also ways to twist them around (the Mannerites are a great example of a pre-apocalyptic habit taken to the extreme).

Also - and I rarely say this about any other franchise - *Wasteland* design encourages you to relax, have fun, and not take itself/yourself too seriously throughout. Fallout is similar, but *Wasteland* didn't feel as

if it had as many bookends for simply going off and exploring a cool new idea and following wherever that road lead. Fallout has many cool elements about it, but there's a limitation on creatures, ambiance, tech, and culture that sometimes prevents you from going maybe as far as you'd like on a certain theme...

...although to play devil's advocate, there's often ways to re-interpret your original idea and tilt it at a certain narrative angle to fit. As an example, you might not be able to download your consciousness into an android's brain like in *Wasteland* but you can explore the virtual reality simulation of Tranquility Lane or try to rescue your own brain (*Spock's Brain*-style) from a mad scientist brain in a floating chassis filled with goo.

What issues did you find in creating your own original IP in the form of Alpha Protocol? What would you have liked to have included in the game but couldn't and what do you pride yourself on most? (note: I really enjoyed Alpha Protocol and its mechanics)

Well, oddly enough, I didn't create Alpha Protocol, there were a lot of noses - and fingers - in that pie from the outset. Halfway through production, however, I was asked to dig in and have a big, delicious helping of that pie, which wasn't too bad because most people at Obsidian wash their hands.

Alpha Protocol was originally championed by our CEO and Tech Director, but neither of them had the time to carry the vision for the project full time, so it went through several hands before it was reset two years into production and was passed into the hands of our Project Director (and co-owner), Chris Parker. We had a lot of assets left over from the first stage of production, and it was an interesting challenge to take all the existing character models and concepts and use them like chess pieces in a new take on the narrative. As for the systems, a lot of the system mechanics kept getting iterated on and iterated on, which caused levels to be rebuilt and rebuilt (stealth came on very late for example), and the fact that weapon mechanics also underwent heavy iteration also caused a lot of difficulties in staging arena fights with opponents. This wasn't the fault of our Systems Lead, as some of this iteration was dictated internally, and some dictated by the publisher.

BUT that said, I think the initial timer-dialogue system was a good idea (lot of urgency), the once-through conversations felt more natural than menus, and I liked the way the story provided a lot of branching, even if it wasn't as "free" as I think a role-playing game should be.

Most of the content we couldn't do we saved when we began to develop the initial vision for Alpha Protocol 2 (before SEGA canceled the idea of a sequel). We wanted the ability to do asynchronous intel sharing between agents (and sometimes disinformation to lure other players into traps in other missions or tip-offs to the bad guys or authorities, which let the spy take advantage of the chaos). We wanted core missions across the globe, where instead of a leading to a single hub, you'd go to a series of hubs encircling/affecting a core mission. There, you'd be able to unlock whatever % of them you wanted to get to the juicy center (or you could just say fuck it, and go right for the central mission's throat). The player could choose these missions based on their character build (you'd have a sense as to which missions favored stealth, diplomacy, or violence), or reactivity between missions (say, luring guards to a vice den robbery a stealth character pulled off, leaving the place the guards were formerly protecting easier to break into without a firefight).

The goal was you could use the reactivity of the missions orbiting the central mission to both influence the other satellite missions as well as the core mission itself. As a simple example: you could seduce a Paris Hilton-style NPC, allowing her to take you back to her mother's heavy guarded mansion and infiltrating it easily without killing anyone - then sneak out without anyone being any wiser, or in another possible scenario, you could use stealth/violence to rob a meth house, and when the crime lord's thugs are diverted from their headquarters to head to the scene, you can slip in to the place they were originally stationed at much easier than before.

Ultimately, the characters that I had the most fun with in *Alpha Protocol* were the ones that were a little off the wall (SIE, Brayko, and especially Heck - kudos to Brian Mitsoda for laying out the concepts and attitude of these characters, they were not my brainchild - he also designed the dialogue system, so double kudos), so we wanted to include more "quirky" *Kill Bill*-style villains in the second installment.

How do you decide on the voice actors for the games you work on? Do you look for a particular tone, cadence, or type of voice?

We usually have an imagined delivery we're looking for that dictates our writing style - at other times if we *know* we are guaranteed to get a certain actor and/or we've heard the audition, we will rewrite the part to fit the voice (we did this for James Urbaniak and Roger Cross, both of their original parts were written much differently until they became available).

True confession: It's always been my dream to get Bill Nye the Science Guy to voice a character in one of our games. We tried to get him for *Fallout: Van Buren* and also the *New Vegas DLC: Old World Blues*, and I'm going to keep trying if we go back to the Fallout universe again. I may want to try and convince Alan Moore, too (he would have made a great Durance in *Eternity*).

How different from game narrative design and writing was comic book writing? Is there a comic book universe that you would love to get the chance to write?

Prose differs from graphic novels which differs from screenplays which differs from short stories which differs from game writing... phew. Each has a certain discipline and skillset, and each caters to a different narrative approach that allows you to stretch your writing legs.

Each one also compliments a set of narrative design - for example, screenplays/scriptwriting (which I got to do for the first time for Wayside/Almost Human's *Legend of Grimrock* movie) compliments heavily voiced cinematic RPG games (Dragon Age, Mass Effect, and arguably Fallout as well), novel and novella prose complements games that favor descriptive text (*Planescape: Torment* and *Torment: Tides of Numenera*), and writing for comics and graphic novels gives you practice telling stories with no words at all - letting the visuals, camera angle, and the prop placement enforce the narrative... or at the least, keeping words at a minimum, as brevity is a plus in most narrative designs for RPGs.

A number of the designers I've worked with are involved in all parts of writing, not just game narratives: Obsidian has Carrie Patel (*The Buried Life*) and Andrew Rowe (*Forging Divinity*), and at inXile, there's Colin McComb (the Oathbreaker series), Nathan Long (*Jane Carver of Waar*), and Adam Heine (his Tides of Numenera novel is excellent) - in addition, I'm privileged to also be working with Pat Rothfuss, who's making the transition from prose (*Name of the Wind*) to *Torment: Tides of Numenera,* and seeing him delve into game writing is a pleasure to see.

Does narrative drive gameplay or is it the other way around?

It can be either/or, and as long as you're not ignoring the systematic elements and moment-to-moment fun, either approach can yield interesting results. I don't think *Planescape: Torment* would have had the same feel had we not approached the systems from the opposite direction (narrative) rather than simply mimicking the other Infinity Engine games' functionality.

Sometimes resources also drive gameplay as well - we had to make a lot of choices in *Planescape: Torment* based on limited resources, so that affected the scope of narrative and gameplay as well.

As an example, the companions in *Torment* often did not have the budget for a wide range of armor and weapon sets, so we made narrative reasons as to why they didn't switch their weapons (hey, Annah, always just liked stabbing people, Morte only gets teeth because he has no arms and taunts because VO is easy, and Vhailor's always been an axe-man). This resource-starvation got a little claustrophobic when it came to the Nameless One, as one of the unfortunate things about the character is I'd preferred more customization and allowing for both genders, but we simply didn't have the resources to do it.

What made you all decide to start "out of the vault" in Fallout: New Vegas? I enjoyed the emphasis on the above world issues and the expansion of the storyline in Fallout 1 and 2.

In the original drafts of the New Vega story, digging yourself out of a grave interested us, so we made a tiny vault for the player. Coffin-sized. In a graveyard. (Being buried in a desert outside Vegas also felt very... Vegas.)

The opening changed over time, though, and mutated into what it finally became, where you square off against Matthew Perry and his goons in the graveyard overlooking Goodsprings. We did use that near-death experience and the damage the bullet did to your brain narratively in the DLCs, however, which was fun.

I agree with you in that the "sample cultures" you find in the outside world are interesting (Fallout 2 I thought had the best selection, largely inherited from Jason Anderson, Tim Cain, and Leonard Boyarsky's initial drafts). The idea of a town with a drug-addicted workforce, the overt use of crime families in politics, the questionable approaches of NCR, the classism in Vault City, and even the re-introduction of slavery into the wastes all were really interesting petri dishes of different societies and practices that could arise (or worse, flourish) in the wastes.

Are there plans to continue expanding the New Vegas universe in both gaming and other multimedia spaces like novels/comics/etc.?

Up to Bethesda, alas, I don't know. I'd love to write comics set in the Fallout universe, and I certainly enjoyed writing *All Roads* for New Vegas (and working with Dark Horse again was a bonus, they're great folks).

How much different is it designing in the First/Third person view point than it is in the isometric viewpoint?

It's pretty different. Door placement, level layouts (whether you can spin the camera or not, with *not* being able to spin the camera actually being more challenging, imo), and sometimes the frustration (or alleviating it) with ranged weapons and targeting all come into play.

In addition, it's sometimes harder to play around with height variations in an isometric title, where it's more customarily a part of the engine in third-person games. Overall, though, I don't have a preference between the two.

Isometric games, such as Baldur's Gate and Icewind Dale, seem to have fallen out of style and are now making a sudden recurrence in the gaming scene. Do you think this is primarily nostalgia based or are new gamers the ones craving the types of interaction that can only be found in those games?

My opinion is nostalgia, but I think newcomers get caught up in it and while they may not be familiar with the older games, they are fans of the studio (either inXile or Obsidian) and are curious enough to try an RPG from us - and hopefully they aren't disappointed.

Beamdog is also breathing life into the genre by resurrecting the old classics from before and allowing them to be enjoyed by a brand-new audience, so very happy about that as well - it's a chance for the next generation to see and play the classics we oldsters grew up with.

Eternity is one of the most anticipated games of 2015 for a LOT of gamers based on its success on Kickstarter and current #1 ranking on Steam. Given that feeling, what did that do to your expectations and plans for the game?

We love the reception, and love that people are enjoying the game - the team worked hard to polish it and make it shine, and I'd like to think people can feel it in the gameplay experience.

Since it came out of the gate so strong, it's clearly a franchise with legs, and even better, it's one we own and can take our time to do right, which is important to us. We don't often have that luxury with other titles, and many of our other titles don't have direct fan support to make it happen, so we owe a lot to our Backers.

Given the state of most gaming computers in 2015, what design elements have you been able to add to Eternity that you were unable to add in previous games?

Well, this may sound odd, but the distribution methods and crowdsourcing methods allowed for funding that changed the game model for us considerably, and made it empowering for a developer to bring a title to market on their own.

Digital distribution allows almost anyone to release a game without the need for a corporate backer, and crowdsourcing allows you to pitch your idea (and reach) a receptive, passionate audience. That, in turn, allows you to get support for ideas that were believed to have fallen out of style (isometric cameras, "old school" RPG adventuring and so forth). I will say that a number of our ideas were tempered by backers (not so much the story and narrative elements, since we kept that close to the chest), so some design elements underwent changes and so did parts of the interface.

One more thing: Beta testing was huge. Getting feedback early on and being able to address it from a large number of players made the game one of the best we've ever done - and we're often unable to pursue Beta testing for many products, but when operating on our own with Kickstarter, it was absolutely something we could pursue, and made for a better game.

What game have you most wished you could have worked on?

Chronotrigger, Fallout 1, *Knights of the Old Republic 1,* and... *Ultima Underworld 1*. Also, strangely, maybe *The Thing*. The stress and psychology mechanics and how your systematic actions (share ammo, heal someone or don't, etc.) and how that affected your allies' behavior intrigued me, and it was something I advocated (unsuccessfully) for our *Aliens: Crucible* title.

In your copious spare time what do you like to do to relax? Do you game (either video, table-top, or RPGs)?

I write (short stories), do editing work (which I find relaxing and helpful when I get writer's block), draw cartoons, and read a lot of comic books. I also watch a good chunk of movies (usually for research), but I try to keep the movie/TV watching confined to when I'm working out on the rowing machine in front of my TV so I don't feel so guilty about it.

What is on your reading and tv/movie watching lists?

The Age of Ultron (Bendis storyline in Marvel), the Iron Fist reboot, the Moonknight reboot (Ellis), the Daredevil Netflix series, Birdman, VHS2, the Imitation Game, catching up on Game of Thrones, and... and... oh well, everything. Also, looking forward to Avengers: Age of Ultron (movie - or is it a live action Pinocchio movie? I have no idea), mostly because of Spader's voice, I never would have thought to cast him, but he's just so... smug. It's a perfect fit for the character.

Is there anything you've always wanted to say in an interview that you have never been asked?

Well... the next question was a welcome one, although I wouldn't have thought of it.

Finally, what can you tell me about all of your fine hats?

They are all retired, for I discovered I am not a hat person. They were pretty upset by this, but they'll find other heads to rest upon. I hope.